

# THE BEGINNINGS OF THE BRETHREN MOVEMENT

IN EUROPE

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The Brethren movement arose in Germany in answer to a great spiritual need. Not all was well religiously in the land of Luther even after the Reformation had achieved its victory. This latter movement, under the leadership of Martin Luther and his associates, had done much toward establishing fundamental doctrine in the Protestant church. Justification by faith had been restored to its rightful place. A stable foundation for spiritual growth had been laid by the reformers which was absolutely essential. The value of this service cannot be overestimated.

This being said, it nevertheless remains sadly true that shortly after the Reformation there settled down upon the Protestant church a barren orthodoxy, a dead formalism, a cold indifference to spiritual things. Christian living was lacking in vitality and radiance. Passion for spiritual attainment became chilled. The Reformation had failed to emphasize the practical side of Christianity. Justification by faith had been stressed, but sanctification of life had been neglected. Little place was given to the ministry of the Holy Spirit in daily experience. Constructive, expositional Bible teaching and preaching was not much in evidence. And, as might be expected, in view of all of this, missionary zeal was practically nonexistent in most places.

Be it further noted that after the yoke of Roman Catholicism had been thrown off, all sorts of religious organizations began to appear, and they became intolerant of each other until there followed the sorry spectacle of the Thirty Years' War of 1618 to 1648 involving all Europe. Finally, the Treaty of Westphalia was signed in 1648, which leagued together the Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed churches into a new persecuting force. These three state churches denied to all others the right to exist in

the German Empire. The terms of this treaty granted the princes of the several German provinces the right to choose which one of the three recognized churches should prevail in their respective provinces. When once a prince chose the church he desired to support, that church was expected to be the choice of all within his province. No other was to be tolerated. Nonconformists were not to be allowed. If found, persecution was to be their lot.

The various princes accepted the terms of the treaty with the exception of Prince Henry of the province of Wittgenstein who allowed full religious freedom to all refugees who sought asylum within his territory. This explains why many religious dissenters congregated in the vicinity of Schwarzenau at the time of the birth of the Tunker movement. In this region many Pietists, Anabaptists, Mennonites, Mystics, and others gathered for religious freedom. As time went on, Prince Henry's popularity aroused the jealousy of the other princes because of his liberal attitude, and they decreed that he must choose his church as they themselves had done. Hence this favored province was closed against dissenters and persecutions began, the severity of which arose to great heights after the death of Henry.

## *Alexander Mack at Schwarzenau*

But this is to anticipate a bit. In this sheltered vicinity before persecution began to be felt, Alexander Mack and others of kindred spirit met together for prayer and Bible study. Deep convictions laid hold upon their hearts. They determined to make the New Testament in its entirety their rule of faith and practice. They sought the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the charting of their future course. Alexander Mack clearly saw that he could not be satisfied to remain simply an associate of the

Pietists of his day. Their views were too varied. They were not definite enough in the matter of doctrine. Some of them believed in infant baptism, which he could not accept. Some of them had no use for the ordinances of the church which he was coming to see were of great importance.

The studies of Mack and his associates led them to believe that trine immersion was the proper mode of baptism as presented in the New Testament. They studied Matthew 18 carefully and found the teaching of church discipline plainly set forth. This was being neglected almost universally. Some of the Pietists discarded all formal church organization. Mack and his friends could not agree to this viewpoint. These brethren studied carefully their New Testaments, together with the religious situation in Germany at that time, and after much thought and prayer decided to form a new religious group at Schwarzenau. In the words of Martin G. Brumbaugh: "It will be seen that the new congregation at Schwarzenau studied all denominations, knew all shades of faith and then turned from Ecclesiasticism and Pietism alike to carve out a new and distinct order of faith and practice. They were debtors to all and followers of none" (History of the Brethren, p. 10f). These pioneers of our Brotherhood were convinced that manmade creeds, all too prevalent in their day, should give way to adherence to "the Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible."

## *First Baptismal Service*

Consequently, in the year 1708 at Schwarzenau, Germany, on the Eider River The Brethren Church came into being. There were eight individuals, five men and three women, who took part in the first baptismal service and thus became the

charter members of our beloved fraternity. The exact day remains unknown, nor do we know who was the first baptizer. "We are only told that it was in the quiet of an early morning in the year 1708, and that the place was at the river Eider. They purposely carefully concealed the exact day of its occurrence, and the name of the first baptizer" (Holsinger, p. 36). The latter was kept secret in order to avoid all possibility of a denomination being named after this man. Henry Holsinger is probably right in thinking that this first memorable service was solemnized in the presence of only a few spectators, otherwise it is difficult to imagine how the secrecy mentioned above was kept. We do know, however, that the first baptizer was chosen by lot. Whoever he was, this brother administered the sacred rite to Alexander Mack, who in turn performed the rite upon the first baptizer and the other six members of this first group. It is worthy of notice that the Scripture read on this occasion was Luke 14:16-33. Such a passage was altogether fitting. These eight pioneers had counted the cost carefully. They were willing to pay the price necessary to the establishment of the new testimony.

Following this initial service of baptism, the group assembled for confirmation and devotion. They experienced a wonderful inward blessing. Joy and gladness filled their souls. They felt they had been true to their convictions and to the Word of God. A deep, settled peace flooded their hearts. Furthermore, they felt a strong urgency to make known abroad the message which had so gripped their own hearts. The words of God to Noah, "Be fruitful, and multiply," seemed to come to them on this occasion with a definite spiritual application. An earnest missionary spirit prevailed among them in those early days which was an indication that the movement was of God. Their enthusiasm spread from town to town. Steadily new members were added to the group.

In a short while; that is, by 1715, a large congregation was established at Schwarzenau. From this place many scattered to other parts of Germany and other churches were

started. Marienborn had a good-sized congregation by 1715. Persecution often attended the efforts of scattered members to organize themselves. Unfriendly princes frowned upon all such efforts. But the work of the Brethren progressed nevertheless. Creyfelt soon became the center of a large congregation under the favoring influences of the King of Prussia. Epstein had another congregation. Following the death of Prince Henry of Wittgenstein about this time, increasing persecution prevailed wherever the Brethren sought to establish themselves. Numbers were scattered, some traveling as far as Switzerland to escape apprehension. By 1720 conditions were so bad that the Brethren at Schwarzenau, the mother church, fled to West Friesland in Holland to escape persecution. State and church combined to stamp out the infant organization. Some of their property was confiscated, others suffered imprisonment, still others, like Christian Liebe, was condemned to the galleys. But their sufferings seemed only to increase the happiness of these good people and to cause them to hold more tenaciously to their deep convictions.

### *The Trial of Subtle Questions*

Another type of trial the Brethren had to face in these early days ought not to be overlooked. Men of learning sought to confound them with sharp disputations and subtle questions regarding their peculiar beliefs. For example, there were the forty searching questions of Eberhard Ludwig Gruber, which were submitted to the Brethren for an answer. The Brethren made careful response. These questions with their answers were published and distributed for the information of all interested persons. This was the first literary work of the Brethren and deserves careful study. Henry Holsinger includes these questions and answers in his *History of the Tunkers and the Brethren Church* (p. 52f.). A perusal of this material gives some idea at least as to the convictions of these early Brethren.

Not only did these Brethren experience trouble from without, but it is also evident that Satan sought to

disrupt and discourage the infant group from within. The Creyfelt congregation in 1717 was thrown into confusion due to the unfortunate experiences gathered about a young man by the name of Hacker who proceeded to preach for the Mennonites when it seemed that his services were not needed in his local congregation, and he received pay for the same. This was the first instance of a Brethren minister being so remunerated. In addition to these factors, Hacker fell in love with the daughter of a certain Mennonite businessman and proceeded to marry her. At the wedding the bride's father performed the ceremony. Consternation was aroused in the Creyfelt church. A division of opinion developed as to the attitude that should be assumed toward young Hacker. Christian Liebe led the opposition against Hacker. John Naas and Peter Becker befriended him. In the end Hacker was excommunicated with disastrous results to the welfare of the church at that time. J. E. Miller, in writing of this episode in his book *The Story of Our Church*, says: "This first serious trouble within the church wrought more harm than the severest persecution from without" (p. 26). It even followed the first party to America.

### *Eyes Turned Toward America*

Thus clouds of trouble and persecution hung low over the new group in Europe. Some were forced to flee to Holland and other places for safety. Some grew discouraged and returned to the established churches. But the faithful held on and turned their eyes toward America. They dreamed of refuge in Pennsylvania, where William Penn was granting full religious liberty to all. Peter Becker, from Creyfelt, led the first group composed of parts of about twenty families to these shores in the autumn of 1719. This was only eleven years following the founding of the church at Schwarzenau. Alexander Mack, of Schwarzenau, often called the founder of The Brethren Church, led the second group composed of the Schwarzenau church to this country in 1729. Thus the curtain falls on the early history of the Tunker movement in Europe.